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Yakṣa Cult at Mathura

(With emphasis on new sculptural findings from Mathura Region)

Vinay Kumar Gupta*

Yakṣa cult is one of the ancient most cults of early historic India and Mathura was a very important, possibly the most important centre of this cult. This cult was popular at the local village or town level and there is a possibility that Yakṣa had occupied the place of *Grāma-devatā* because in the region of Braj, I have observed in a number of villages the shrines of Jakhaiya baba (in the villages of Thakur dominance) and Bhumiya baba (in the villages of Jat dominance) which are the local names of Yakṣa as a deity. A number of significant works are already available on Yakṣas,¹ so in this paper we don't need to go in detail on Yakṣas. The main emphasis would be on describing the newly found Yakṣa images during the explorations.

It is during the Mauryan and Śuṅga period when various Yakṣa images in the medium of stone came into existence in the region of Mathura as well as in Pawayā, Patna, Besnagar and Kaushambi. All these places were major town and were related with traders and commercial activities. The important Yakṣa images of the earliest phase belonging to 3rd – 2nd century B.C. and found from the region of Braj are as follows :

1. Yakṣa from Parkham (M. M. No. C.1, Fig. 1).
2. Yakṣa from Baroda village (M. M. No. C. 23).
3. Yakṣa from Mathura (published by V. S. Agrawala).²
4. Yakṣī from Nagla Jhinga (M. M. No. 72.1, Fig. 2 a & b).
5. Yakṣa from village Noh (in worship Fig. 3).
6. Fragmentary Yakṣa from Noh (Bharatpur Museum No. 213.64).
7. Yakṣa from Virabai village, Bharatpur (Bharatpur Museum No. 301).
8. Standing headless Yakṣa from Mathura (M. M. No. 56.4338).
9. Yakṣa from Palwal (Lucknow Museum No. O.107).
10. Agnipāṇi Yakṣa from Bharna Kalan (M. M. No. 87.146).
11. Mudgarapāṇi Yakṣa from Bharna Kalan (M. M. No. 87.145).
12. Yakṣa bust from Bharatpur Gate, Mathura (M. M. No. E. 9).
13. Inscribed Maṇibhadra Yakṣa from Pawayā (now kept in Gwalior Museum).

Some of the important features of the above-mentioned images are :

1. These have been carved in round (*chaturmukhadarśana*) and are free-standing but the main effect is frontal as to be viewed from the front mainly.
2. Most of these are of colossal size about 10' or more (even the smaller ones are larger than life size) and massively built with pronounced emphasis on muscular strength.

* Consultant (Publication), ASI, Janpath, New Delhi-11.

3. The cult is totally indigenous as the drapery of the deity consists of a turban on the head and upper scarf thrown on the shoulders and arms, or tied round the chest and a *dhori* hanging below up to the ankles and fastened with a girdle.
4. The ornaments consist of heavy ear-rings, heavy torque and a flat triangular necklace and also armlets with feathered projections.
5. These were the cult images to be worshipped as an independent deity.
6. Though it is being said that these were more of local deities, the predominance of Maṇibhadra Yakṣa and strong possibility of other Yakṣa images being related with the Lord of Wealth, most of these have to be taken as the object of worship of the traders specifically.
7. In some of the images, the Yakṣa holds a money bag in his left hand while the right hand appears to be in *abhaya mudrā*.
8. In a few cases, there is possibility of the right hand holding a *chaurī*, in such cases the deity should be considered of secondary status in comparison to a prominent deity.
9. In some images, the image has a protuberant belly symbolizing the nature of the Yakṣa as provider of wealth and prosperity. It can also be related with fecundity as a protuberant belly is a symbol of pregnancy and fertility.
10. All these sculptures are in standing position but the *mudrā* is not *samapāda sthānaka* as the left leg of the Yakṣa is sometimes bent slightly at the knee.

The Parkham Yakṣa has an inscription on its pedestal which possibly refers it as Bhagavān Maṇibhadra and also of its being carved by a pupil Gomitaka of Kuṇika—the master sculptor.³ The Yakṣī from Nagla Jhinga is referred to as a Yakṣī Lāyāvā and also being carved by a pupil of Kuṇika name Nāka.⁴ The inscription on the Yakṣa statuette from Pawaya mentions it as that of Maṇibhadra Yakṣa which was installed by the members of a Goṣṭhī at Pawaya.⁵ Besides these images, there are other Yakṣa and Yakṣī images known from the region of Mathura which were not cult images but were part of religious establishments e.g. carved on railing pillars etc. In between the late 2nd century B.C. and the Kushan period, some other Yakṣa images of varying dimensions came into existence. The size of these images is generally not colossal.

During the Kushān period, there is observed a remarkable change in the iconography of the Yakṣas. The colossal sculptures now give place to medium to small size sculptures. Majority of the sculptures are in seated position. Now, generally the Yakṣa sculptures represent the chief of the Yakṣas (either Vaiśravaṇa or Kubera) who bestows money and prosperity on the worshipper. After the Gupta period, the independent cult of Yakṣas seems to have given way to the subsidiary cult of Yakṣas as secondary deities to the other prominent sects and their deities. The ancient cult of Yakṣas was able to survive even during this period as various shrines of Jakhaiya and Bhumiya baba in the Braj region indicate. But this continuity is more of a forgotten tradition than an independent cult popular in post-Gupta times. In some way during this period, the cult of *Mahāvīra* Hanuman is related with the cult of Yakṣas as the shrine of Bhumiya baba and Jakhaiya baba is generally found in association with Hanuman like I observed at the important sites of Parkham and Baroda as well as at many other places. The title *Mahāvīra* used for Hanuman is also an appellation used for Yakṣas as both these deities are extremely powerful in their physique. Besides, prior to late or post-Gupta period, independent sculptures of Hanuman are almost negligible, while after this period he becomes a very popular deity. In contrast to this the Yakṣa worship was very popular prior to late-Gupta period, while after this period, Yakṣa is rarely observed as a cult deity.

New sculptural findings :

1. Lower half of an image from Lohvan

This sculptural fragment consisting of the lower half of an image was observed at village Lohvan in District Mathura. This sculpture is being worshipped there as demon Lohāsura who is said to have been killed by Lord Kṛṣṇa. In this fragment, the left leg is slightly bent at the knee like the Parkham and other Yakṣas. He is clad in a *dhōṭī*. Other details of it are missing because of excessive use of oil over it. On comparative analysis, it appears to be the lower half of a Yakṣa image datable to *circa* 2nd century B.C.

2. Yakṣa plaque from Parkham, Mathura

This small sculptural plaque was found from village Parkham Gujar of District Mathura. It is a different village from the well-known Parkham (Berī) village but appears to be equally important. This plaque depicts the head of a person who is wearing a turban with a knot to the right. It has large incised eyes. The carving in low relief as well as the overall treatment of this plaque indicates a Śuṅga period date for it. It might be representing either a Yakṣa or a Yakṣī.

3. Fragmentary relief from village Sonsa, Mathura

This fragment consisting of an above-neck portion of a deity was observed to be in worship at village Sonsa of District Mathura. This fragment is much defaced to form a proper idea but the heavy and round ear-rings, the carving in low relief and the shape of the face indicate towards a Śuṅga date. In the raised right hand of the deity an object is held which appears to be a snake. In the absence of other attributes, the image might not be identified as an important Brāhmanical deity but keeping in mind its early date might be put in the category of Yakṣas.

4. Headless Yakṣa image from Chaturbhuj Khera, Hathras

This headless image of a Yakṣa was observed at a shrine situated on the top of the mound of Chaturbhuj Khera in District Hathras. This sculpture is much defaced but is identifiable as a Yakṣa. The deity is shown seated in the usual squatting manner (in *bhadrāsana*) over an 'altar', as is observed in a number of Kushan Yakṣa sculptures. The 'altar' or base consists of two crossed bars indicating the frontage. Two small figures are also visible on both sides of the base. This sculpture might be dated to 2nd century A.D. or slightly later.

5. Yakṣa image from Parkham Gujar, Mathura

This image was observed to be in worship at a shrine in village Parkham Gujar of District Mathura. The image represents a Yakṣa seated in a squatting pose over an 'altar'-shaped base consisting of two crossed bars. The feet of the Yakṣa have not been shown as the artist intended to represent them behind the base. The Yakṣa is wearing round ear-rings and a beautiful double-stringed pearl necklace. He is shown with a protuberant or pot belly. In his left hand, he holds a long object which appears to be a thick pleat of his drapery. Generally, a sack containing money or coins is shown held in his left hand. The right hand of the Yakṣa is possibly holding a goblet filled with wine. This sculpture should belong to early Kushan period.

6. Headless Yakṣa from Nandghāt, Mathura

This Yakṣa statue was observed at a shrine situated on the ancient mound of Nandghāt along River Yamuna in District Mathura. The roughly 1 m high sculpture depicts a Yakṣa seated on a high throne in *lalitasāna*. He is of quite heavy physique with a protuberant belly. Position of his hands is

unclear because of the damage to the sculpture. Two attendant females are visible on either side of the deity. The sculpture was probably made of red sandstone but now appears to be of grey colour because of excessive deterioration by the atmosphere and by the worshippers. This sculpture might belong to late Kushan or early Gupta period.

7. Sculpture depicting two seated Yakṣas from Nandghāt, Mathura

This sculpture was found at a shrine situated on the ancient mound of Nandghāt near Gangrauli in District Mathura. The spotted red sandstone sculpture depicts two Yakṣas seated side by side possibly on some wicker stools. The Yakṣa seated to right has a protuberant belly and appears to be more prominent of the two Yakṣas. Possibly, a sack is hanging down from the left hand of this Yakṣa, so he might be identified as Kubera. The Yakṣa seated to the left also appears to be a male Yakṣa. A thick scarf is running over the shoulders of the Yakṣas. Not many details are identifiable because of the defacing of the sculptural relief as well as because of the heavy encrustation on it. This sculpture definitely requires some cleaning for getting more information.

8. Yakṣa couple from Jaghina, Bharatpur

This sculpture was observed to be in worship at a shrine in village Jaghina of District Bharatpur. It depicts two deities seated side by side in *lalitāsana* on separate wicker stools. The figure seated to the left possibly has his right hand in *abhaya mudrā* and his left hand has been placed near his knee. The other figure seated to the right (to the left of the male figure) has her right hand in *abhaya mudrā* while the left hand is holding a child seated on her left knee. This female deity definitely represents an aspect of the *mātṛkās*. These two figures might be identified as Kubera and Hārītī. Some small figures are visible in the lower panel and these might be children associated with the couple or the worshippers.

The other fragmentary and defaced Yakṣa sculptures are :

9. Sculpture from Kirarai, Mathura belonging to Kushan period.
10. Yakṣa from Asgarpur, Mathura belonging to Kushan period.
11. Yakṣa from Aiyera Khera, Mathura which is being worshipped as Khera baba and possibly belongs to late Kushan period.
12. Yakṣa from Jasauli, Mathura of Kushan period.
13. Fragment of Yakṣa image, Ajnauthi of Kushan period.
14. Headless Yakṣa from Ladpur, Hathras of Kushan period.
15. Headless Yakṣa from Lakhnu, Hathras of Kushan period.
16. Headless and handless bust of Yakṣa from Radhakund, Mathura belonging to Kushan period.
17. Headless Yakṣa image from Gwarau, Hathras of early Gupta period.
18. Headless Yakṣa image from Naugaon, Mathura of Kushan period.

19. Yakṣa image from Shahjadpur, Mathura

There are two sculptures in this Plate found from a religious site in village Shahjadpur of District Mathura. The sculpture to the left represents a Yakṣa holding a wine cup in his left hand while in the right hand, he holds a rosary. The sculpture to the right may also be a Yakṣa.

20. Yakṣa image from Pelhora, Mathura (Fig. 4)

This beautiful sculpture was observed at a religious shrine in village Pelhora of District Mathura. The Yakṣa seated on a lotus throne in *lalitāsana* holds a money sack in his left hand while his right hand is missing. His right hand might have been in *abhaya mudrā*. Such hair-style as that of this Yakṣa (*kākapakṣa*) was quite popular during the Gupta period. To the right of the Yakṣa, a female is standing holding possibly a *chhatra*. She might be the wife of Yakṣa Kubera or just an attendant. The sculpture should possibly belong to Gupta period.

21. Yakṣa sculpture from Radhakund, Mathura (Fig. 5)

This sculpture was found at a religious shrine in village Radhakund of District Mathura. It is quite similar to the image from Pelhora. The Yakṣa Kubera has been shown seated on a wicker stool holding a money bag in his left hand while his right hand holds a fruit. He is wearing large ear-rings and a thick round torque. This image might be belonging to about 6th-7th century A.D.

22. Yakṣa relief in terracotta from Bhainsa, Mathura (Fig. 6)

This interesting relief was observed in village Bhainsa of District Mathura. A Yakṣa with boyish charm is shown seated in *sukhāsana* and is slightly comparable to a terracotta plaque kept in Mathura Museum. The overall treatment and the expression at the face confirm a Gupta period date for this plaque.

After observing these new findings of Yakṣa images, it can be said that a clear decline is visible in the number of images after Gupta period, whereas the periods prior to it are very rich in the number of Yakṣa images. The reason for it should be the growing popularity of Bhāgavata cult since in *Śrīmadbhāgavadgītā* (XVII.4), Lord Kṛṣṇa categorically mentions that who are of *sātvika pravṛtti* worship *devas* like him while those who are of *rājasika pravṛtti* worship the Yakṣa. So, there is visible an increasing emphasis on the worship of the supreme deities in comparison to the worldly deities like the Yakṣas.

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*Figure-1 : Parkham Yakṣa
(M. M. No. C. 1)*



*Figure - 2 a ; Nagla Jhinga Yakṣi
(M. M. No. 72. 1) front view.*



*Figure - 2 b : Nagla Jhinga Yakṣi
(M. M. No. 72. 1) back view.*



Figure-3 : Yakṣa from village Noh
(in worship)



Figure-4 : Kubera, Pellhora,
Mathura.



Figure-5 : Kubera, Radhakund, Mathura.



Figure-6 : Terracotta Yakṣa plaque, Bhainsa,
Mathura.